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SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SA/INS AND DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [PGOV](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: LEGISLATIVE LIMBO?: ANTI-CONVERSION BILL SENT TO PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE

REF: A. COLOMBO 0818

[B](#). COLOMBO 0787

[C](#). 04 COLOMBO 1379

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: The private member's bill presented by the Buddhist nationalist Jathika Hela Urumayu (JHU) to prohibit "unethical" conversion was read out in Parliament for the second time on May 6. The Speaker referred the bill to an as-yet unconstituted Standing Committee for further review; the Committee will have six months from the date of its appointment in which to complete its review. Although the JHU is optimistic that the bill will pass by mid-June, we believe the Speaker's move could be a delaying tactic intended to keep the bill from ever seeing the legislative light of day. End summary.

[1](#)2. (U) The private member's bill presented by the Buddhist nationalist Jathika Hela Urumayu (JHU) to ban so-called "unethical" conversions was read out in Parliament for the second time on May 6. Speaker W.J.M.Lokubandara, a member of the opposition United National Party (UNP), referred the bill to an as-yet unconstituted Standing Committee, to be composed of 35 government and opposition MPs, to modify the bill in accord with Supreme Court findings that key parts of the proposed legislation were unconstitutional (Ref C). The Committee will have six months from the date of its still-pending constitution to consider proposals for amendments to the bill, including from members of the public, before presenting its final recommendation. Any changes proposed to the bill by the Committee in addition to those recommended by the Supreme Court can then either be accepted or rejected by the JHU before the bill is brought for a third reading and final vote. If the bill is not amended in accord with Supreme Court recommendations, it will require a two-thirds majority for passage.

[1](#)3. (SBU) The JHU seems confident that the Standing Committee will move expeditiously and the bill will pass--with one optimistic MP suggesting June 21, the day Sri Lankan Buddhists celebrate the conversion of the island's inhabitants to the majority religion almost 3,000 years ago, as a possible date. Another JHU MP, Ven. Athureliye Ratana Thero, told us on May 9 that he does not expect the Government to introduce its own draft legislation, leaving the way clear for the JHU bill to go forward. (Note: His assessment that the government will not proceed at this time with its bill tracks with our understanding as well. The Secretary of the Buddha Sasana Ministry told POL FSN in late

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April that the Minister had instructed him to withhold gazetting the Government bill, citing U.S. opposition. End note.)

[1](#)4. (U) Catholic, evangelical and mainstream Protestant leaders staged a protest rally against proposed anti-conversion legislation in the predominantly Christian area of Chilaw in northwestern Sri Lanka on May 7. The two-hour rally was peaceful, according to the Senior Superintendent of Police for the area, but few national-level or local politicians attended, other than Minister of Christian Affairs Milroy Fernando, who hails from Chilaw. The National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka estimated the crowd at 2,500.

[1](#)5. (SBU) It has been ten months since the JHU presented its controversial bill for a first reading, and nine months since the Supreme Court found essential parts of it unconstitutional. Depending on how quickly the Speaker appoints members to the Standing Committee--and how quickly the Committee decides on revisions to the bill--it could be many months more before the JHU's proposed legislation has its third reading. We think this extended time frame would suit most members of the two largest parties, from whom there seems to be little enthusiasm for the bill, just fine. With the exception of the JHU, most MPs we talk to acknowledge that passage--and even discussion--of such a bill would be inimical to religious tolerance and could incite greater communal discord. In his April 20 discussion with Assistant Secretary for South Asian Affairs Christina Rocca, Opposition

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Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe said that his United National Party is opposed to the legislation and had tried to stop the JHU bill in committee (Ref B). The Speaker's foot-dragging in appointing MPs to the Standing Committee may be intended to do just that by drawing out the proceedings for as long as possible. We are pleased by the Government's apparent decision to hold off on pushing its own version of anti-conversion legislation forward, and will continue to press our view that any such legislation could undermine religious freedom in Sri Lanka.

ENTWISTLE